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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000397

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN POLITICAL PRISONER BUNNI SENTENCED TO FIVE YEARS

REF: A. 06 DAMASCUS 2338

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 0254

Classified By: A/DCM William Roebuck, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. The Damascus Criminal Court on April 24 sentenced political dissident Anwar al-Bunni to five years in prison and a \$2,000 fine. Nearly all of Bunni's supporters and foreign diplomats present expressed shock at the severity of the Court's decision. The regime's response to Bunni from the time he first signed the Damascus-Beirut Declaration has been characterized by harshness and overreaction. The sentence itself, however, fits well within those parameters and is not a surprise to people who understand the regime's calculations and its willingness to use relatively well-calibrated repression to maintain a lid on any nascent internal dissent. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) On April 24, the Damascus Criminal Court convicted imprisoned human rights lawyer and civil society activist Anwar al-Bunni of &spreading false information in an attempt to weaken the nation.⁸ On the same day, the Court sentenced him to five years in prison and levied a fine of 100,000 Syrian Pounds, or \$2,000. Bunni was initially arrested on May 17, 2006 as part of a round-up of more than a dozen dissidents who signed the Damascus-Beirut Declaration last spring, as reported in Ref A. (Note: The Damascus-Beirut Declaration, which was signed by scores of Syrian and Lebanese activists and intellectuals, called for improved relations between Lebanon and Syria. The Syrian regime considered the initiative a serious crossing of redlines and reacted with speed and severity to reverse this extra-regime expression of Syrian-Lebanese solidarity. End Note.)

[1](#)3. (SBU) In the first few months following Bunni,s arrest, the consensus among Western diplomats was that the SARG would primarily try Bunni for his role as director of the EU funded civil society training center. (Note: In fact, the \$2,000 fine is payable to the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and is a penalty for &founding an organization without approval by the relevant authorities.⁸ End Note.) Eventually, however, the regime zeroed in on Bunni,s statements to the foreign press that Muhammed Shafer Haysa was tortured to death (Ref B). (Note: Haysa,s death was also reported in the 2006 Human Rights Report. End Note.)

[1](#)4. (C) Almost all in attendance expressed shock at the severity of the sentence. According to one British diplomat and several Syrian defense lawyers, five years imprisonment far exceeded their expectations for a conviction on

& spreading false information in an attempt to weaken the nation.⁸ It is also noteworthy that Bunni's conviction is the first time someone has been found guilty of the afore-mentioned charge in Criminal Court, according to defense lawyers. All other convictions for similar charges have taken place in the secretive State Security Court. Bunni's brother, Akram, downplayed the likelihood of an appeal, noting that all judicial decisions in Syria are politically motivated, rendering legal appeals essentially useless. Subsequent press reports out of Damascus, however, quoted Bunni's defense lawyers as saying the case would be appealed. Despite the harsh sentence, Bunni appeared to be in good spirits and continued to present a defiant pose, smiling and waving to his numerous supporters.

15. (SBU) There were many prominent opposition figures in the crowd including former MP and political prisoner Riad Seif. There was also a large contingent of diplomats including the Canadian Ambassador. In addition to poloff, other diplomatic representatives included those from Germany, Britain, France, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Romania and the Netherlands. Bunni's brother and wife were also present.

16. (C) COMMENT: The severe sentence imposed on Bunni does not bode well for other detained political dissidents such as Michel Kilo, Mahmoud Issa and Kamal Labwani. Many western diplomats expressed particular concern for Labwani who, under Syrian law, faces much more serious charges than Bunni did. In particular, Labwani faces the capital charge of & encouraging a foreign nation to invade Syria during a time of war.⁸ In the end, Bunni received approximately the same sentence as did former MPs Seif and Ma'moud Homsy, who were convicted in similar high-profile political show trials in 2001. While a five-year sentence struck our opposition

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contacts as exceedingly harsh, it could have been even harsher. The SARG seemed to want to send a signal of severity but not go so far as to recall the "repression without limits" period of the elder Asad, where human rights activists like Riad al-Turk and Yassin Haj Saleh, among dozens of others, spent most of two decades of their lives in prison. The regime also seemed to be calculating, however, that a sentence significantly under five years would have sent a signal of leniency that the SARG, still under heavy international pressure, and facing the prospect of a Special Lebanon Tribunal (possibly imposed by the UNSC), did not want to convey. While the sentence has struck the opposition and other contacts as harsh, most Syrians are likely to view it as about what was expected, given the note of continued defiance that the regime seems to want to project. We note that traditionally the regime modulates the degree of repression it imposes, paying relatively close attention on whether its message of intimidation has registered with Syrians and on the degree of international pressure it is under. This sentence for Bunni seems to reflect the regime's sense that its message has registered and has completely frightened civil society and any other would-be opposition elements, and that international pressure has eased, at least temporarily, but could ramp up significantly if the Lebanon tribunal moves forward. The bottom line is that the regime's response to Bunni from the time he first signed the Damascus-Beirut Declaration has been characterized by tremendous harshness and overreaction. The sentence itself, however, fits well within those parameters and is not a surprise to people who understand the regime's calculations and its willingness to use relatively well-calibrated repression to maintain a lid on any nascent internal dissent.

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